

Learner Support Services and Quality of Education in Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract - *The enrolment and demand for university education across the world, has grown at an unprecedented rate especially in the 20th and 21st centuries. This has mainly been attributed to the private and social benefits associated with higher education. The governments, both in the developing and developed nations have worked tirelessly to provide access for university education to their citizens. Unfortunately, government funding for these institutions in Africa has been declining. The universities have been forced to operate under tight budgets and in many cases they have strained in provision of adequate learner support services thus compromising the quality of university education.*

This study sought to establish the adequacy and availability of academic guidance and advising services, guidance and counselling services, and financial advising and funding services and their influence on quality of education in public universities in Kenya. The study was exploratory in nature and was informed by Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality (1989). The study was carried out in two public universities in Kenya, which were purposively sampled. The sample constituted 21 deans of schools and 411 fourth year students who were purposefully and randomly selected.

The study found out that, even though various efforts were put in place by the two institutions, services related to academic guidance and advising, guidance and counselling and financial advising and funding were inadequate. The study contributes to the empirical evidence on the extent to which learner support services have been availed in the public universities in Kenya. It is hoped that the findings will be important to the university management and regulatory bodies in developing policies to strengthen learner support services in universities in Kenya.

Keywords: *University, Education, Learner, support services, Quality*

INTRODUCTION

The demand and increasing importance of higher education is rising across the world. The transition to the knowledge-based economy; increase in the number of candidates completing their secondary education and the general increase in demand for qualified manpower for the 21st century have been the major factors contributing to the growth of university education [1]. The labour market is demanding graduates with a range of new competencies including communication, innovativeness, creativity and critical thinking, problem solving, Information Communication and Technological skills, adaptability and teamwork among others. More so, many countries especially the developing ones have realized that higher education can play a crucial role in accelerating competitiveness and productivity potential [2]. Besides, the international organizations and especially the World Bank have been in the forefront advising and supporting developing countries in expansion and growth of tertiary level of education. Due to these demands, many countries have responded by increasing access to university education. According to Materu [1], the number of tertiary students in Sub-Saharan Africa increased by 3.6 times between 1985 and 2002 led by Rwanda (55 percent), Namibia (46 percent), Uganda (37 percent) Tanzania (32 percent) and Kenya (27 percent). In Kenya specifically, public universities rose from 7 before 2010 to 30 by 2016 with total enrolment capacity in undergraduate programmes increasing from less than 50,000 in 2007 to over 400,000 in 2015 with an annual growth rate of 22.3% [3], [4]. This increase was mainly attributed to the large number of secondary school leavers seeking higher education.

The increase in expansion both in terms of enrolments and the number of universities has however not been matched with corresponding increase in learner support services to support quality teaching and learning. Subsequently, this has resulted in compromised quality of university education.

World Bank [5], for instance observed that stakeholders are expressing dissatisfaction on the quality of graduates being churned out by universities especially at the time when many governments across the world have reduced funding for these institutions. Many stakeholders have complained that the graduates are lacking the key skills of the 21st century mainly in innovativeness, creativity and critical thinking as well as problem solving among others [4]. In Kenya several scholars have argued that the quality of university education has been compromised mainly due to the rise in student enrolments and haphazard expansion without adequate staff and learning facilities. In 2013, a report by Results for Development Institute (R4D) observed that most graduates from universities in Kenya were uncompetitive in the job market due to gaps in their training forcing employers to incur extra expenses in retraining. A report entitled *Kenya's Education Achievement and Challenges* observed that Kenyan university graduates lacked crucial knowledge, skills and competencies for the labour market [5]. In addition, the increased enrolments without commensurate funding have led to perceptions that universities have not been operating with adequate resources and facilities leading to low quality university education [4].

Concept of Quality of Education

Scholars have defined quality of education differently. According to Bornman [6], different actors in the field of education have conflicting interpretations of quality education thus making it difficult to arrive at a conclusive definition. He however argues that there should rather be reference to notions of quality instead of a definition. These notions are: quality exemplified in an exceptionally high standard; quality as transformation; quality in terms of fitness for purpose; quality as quest for zero defect; quality as value for money and quality as a product evaluated against customer satisfaction. Quality of education is a set of processes and outcomes that are defined qualitatively. In this case qualitative indicators include the quality of the curriculum, quality of facilities, services and technology and policies and practices that institutions have put in place [7]. Further, UNICEF [8], in its paper *'defining quality in education'* identified five dimensions of quality: learners, environments, content, processes and outcomes. The paper noted that these elements must be adequate and relevant for quality education to be achieved. However it is the

fitness-for-purpose which is based on the view that quality has no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product or service that is seen by many quality assurance experts as a meaningful way of defining quality because it includes all other definitions, embraces all types of institutions, and is flexible [9].

Learner Support Services

Learner support services are those services that are meant to make the learner's academic life more effective and comfortable. The Glossary of Quality Assurance in Japanese Higher Education [10] defines "learning support" as "a comprehensive support system in higher education institutions which enables students to concentrate in studying effectively, such as guidance for taking courses, student counselling and advice". (P. 71). Learner support services include those human aspects that support individual learners in their academic life as well as providing a supportive learning environment. However, these learner support services differ across institutions of higher learning depending on their needs and requirements. Differences could be due to factors such as the number of students enrolled, location and even institutional mission statements. Learner support services are not only important to the learners but also to the faculty who may seek them in order to optimize their work. These support services may be categorized to include: student advisory services such as academic advising, guidance and counselling, financial advisory services and professional services such as research services and communication services among others. They may also include non-academic services needed by the learner such as: school social work services, tutorial/special education services, medical and dentistry services and accommodation services. These services are critical especially for university students where heterogeneity in terms of students' age, gender, socio-cultural and economic backgrounds are likely to come into play [11]. It is generally acknowledged that students need support in order to fit within this environment which will in turn enable them to concentrate on their academic work.

The focus of this paper was on availability and adequacy of three key student support services, namely: academic guidance and advising, guidance and counseling, and financial support and advising services and their influence on quality of education in public universities in Kenya.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was grounded on Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality [12]. According to this theory, every time an individual changes roles, enters a new environment, experiences a transition or is in some form of difficulty, the potential for feeling marginalized or neglected arises. Perceiving oneself as not fitting well, feeling like no one cares about you and what you do impacts a person's feeling of marginality. A person who feels marginalized or neglected may not maximize his/her full potential. In this study therefore, it is important to appreciate that students, whether freshmen or continuing, are at different levels of transition in their lives, and lack of support from the institution may make these students feel marginalized and neglected. Such students may not be able to concentrate on their academic work which ultimately bears a negative effect on their learning and work. It is imperative therefore, that institutions of higher learning focus and put in place support services and environments that support students in their academic journeys. Such environments will motivate students to learn and also promote high retention rates for the institution. Further, availability of support services will increase loyalty towards the institution by various stakeholders guaranteeing its short and long term future.

METHODOLOGY

The study was exploratory in nature. Exploratory research is conducted to gain new insights and discover ideas. Exploratory design was considered most appropriate since not many cases of the research problem were documented. The target population comprised of fourth year students and deans of schools at two public universities in Kenya. In total 21,071 fourth year students and 21 deans of schools were targeted in this study. The two public universities (Kenyatta University and Technical University of Kenya) were purposively sampled. Kenyatta University was selected based on the fact that it is the university with highest number of students in Kenya as well as a centre of excellence in educational programmes. In addition, Kenyatta University is one of the oldest universities in Kenya. Technical University of Kenya was selected because it is one of the newly established universities mainly focusing on technical courses and at the same time, it is the university with the highest number of students among other technical universities. A sample of 411 students and 21 deans participated in the study. Questionnaires (both open and close ended) were used

to gather information from the students and deans of schools. Permission was granted by the respective universities subject to the information collected being used for academic purposes only.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results for data collected on adequacy and availability of academic guidance and advising services, guidance and counseling services, and financial advising and funding services and their influence on quality of education are presented in this section.

Academic guidance and advising services

Academic guidance and advising services are the services that help learners to make decisions regarding the career aspirations as well as address the difficulties they may be facing in their academic life. The services are mainly carried out by academic advisors who are mandated to guide students in their academic journey. Academic guidance and counselling is an important support service to enhance students' success in their programmes of study. The researchers sought to establish the availability and adequacy of this learner support service and its influence on quality university education (See Table 1 below).

Table 1: Availability of academic guidance and advisory services (N=365)

Answer option	f	%
Strongly disagree	53	14.5
Disagree	75	20.5
Do not know	56	15.3
Agree	151	41.4
Strongly agree	30	8.2

Source: Students questionnaire

Findings showed that 181 (49.6%) students were aware that academic advisory services were provided in their universities. Majority of the students (54.6%) at TUK, were either not aware of the existence of academic advisory services or they were not satisfied with the way this service was being implemented in their universities as compared to only 29.4% students at KU who were not satisfied with this service. This finding was corroborated by a majority of the deans (55.6%) who did not know whether this service existed. A number of students especially at TUK do not have adequate access to this service. This finding corroborates with the findings by other studies [13, 14, and 15] which found out that that many universities had not put in place adequate student

academic advising services to support their students in their academic journeys. According to these studies, lack of academic advising services could lead to students making wrong career choices, or in the worst case scenario, drop out due to challenges affecting them in the courses of their studies.

Guidance and counselling services

Guidance and counselling service is a professional service aimed at assisting students to understand themselves, others, school environment and attain abilities to adjust accordingly [16]. Students have differing needs that may affect their learning. In addition, once students get into the university, they are independent and in most cases away from their parents. In some cases, students are not able to cope with this new environment and some may resort to drugs and other immoral behaviours. Guidance and counselling services therefore come in handy in such

situations in order to help students facing these new challenges. It helps learners adjust to their environment and develop the attitude to set individual goals that will enhance improvement of their educational programmes while in school and even in their post school life. The aspect of guidance and counselling focuses on preparing students for unanticipated life events and ongoing personal difficulties and challenges that they face in Universities [11]. For instance, guidance and counselling services enhance the retention rates of students with high chances of dropping out. Lack of this service may also affect learners who are facing difficulties and eventually impact on their learning. The researchers sought to establish, from the students, the availability and influence of guidance and counselling services on quality of education in the public universities (See Table 2).

Table 2: Availability of guidance and counselling services (N=370)

Answer option	f	%
Strongly disagree	72	19.5
Disagree	82	22.2
Do not know	64	17.3
Agree	125	33.8
Strongly agree	27	7.3

Source: Students Questionnaire

Out of 370 respondents, 154 (41.7%) indicated that they had no access to counselling services. Levels of satisfaction for those who accessed the guidance and counselling service varied sharply between KU and TUK, with 43% and 21.2% of the respondents respectively expressing satisfaction. Generally, availability of quality guidance and counselling service in the universities was rated as low. This finding is supported by Gudo, Olol and Oanda [16] who found out that only 44.41% students in public universities in Kenya were satisfied with guidance and counselling services, meaning majority were dissatisfied. Interestingly, a survey carried out by the Association of University and College Counsellors in the year 2002 found out that all public universities in Kenya had established guidance and counselling department in their campuses. The implication of this finding is that universities have established guidance and counselling departments or units but do not offer quality services.

Financial Advising and Funding Services

Finances are central in sustaining the life of the students in universities. A study that was conducted by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CSSE) in 2008 found out that 45% of students noted that finances were crucial for their continued stay in universities. With rising economic challenges in Kenya as is the case in many developing countries, students have found themselves struggling to survive in the universities and a majority of households are struggling to finance education for their children. This situation has been made worse by the reduction in financing of education by the government. For instance, with the introduction of cost the sharing policy in financing higher education in Kenya, whereby students have to pay a certain amount directly to the university in order to be enrolled, access to university education has been limited to the rich who are able to pay. The poor households that cannot afford to support education for their children have been left out [17]. It is against this back-drop that students need information on alternative and appropriate avenues to raise finances for their education. In addition, they need to be equipped with financial management skills since it is an important student support service. The researchers investigated the availability and influence of financial support and advisory service in universities in Kenya and came up with the following findings (See Table 3 below).

Table 3: Availability of financial advisory offices (N=364)

Answer option	f	%
Strongly disagree	90	24.7
Disagree	103	27.5
Do not know	56	15.4
Agree	89	23.8
Strongly agree	26	7.1

Source: *Students Questionnaire*

Findings from both the deans (50%) and students (52%) indicate that the two study universities have not adequately provided financial advisory services to their students. Availability of this service was rated low by 50.5 percent and 78.8 percent students at KU and TUK respectively. This finding supports the study by Gichui [17], who found out that financial management and advisory services were inadequate in universities. This is bound to ultimately affect the quality of education as students spend much of their time looking for alternative ways to raise money for their education at the expense of academic work.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the availability and influence of learner support services on quality of education in public universities in Kenya. The paper asserts that attainment of quality education in universities must be supported by provision of adequate learner support services, key among them being: academic advisory services, guidance and counselling, and financial management and advisory services. Provision of these services is critical to the wellbeing of the learner. The paper found out that these important learner support services have not been adequately provided and implemented in the study universities and this may compromise the quality of education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The main aim of this study was to investigate the availability and adequacy of learner support services and their influence on the quality of education in public universities in Kenya. Learner support services are critical elements of quality education. The research findings come at a time when various studies and policy documents [9, 18, and 19] have outlined the need for learner support services in universities as prerequisites for creating quality environments to enhance quality learning. The major practical contribution of this study therefore is that it provides empirical data on the extent to which three key learner

support services being academic advisory, guidance and counseling, and financial advising services have been availed in public universities in Kenya. This information is important given that very little empirical data exists in this area. It is believed that the findings will be important to the Ministry of Education, University Management and other key stakeholders such as the Commission for University Education (CUE) and the Inter University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) in developing policies revolving around students support services in order to enhance quality of education in universities.

RECOMMENDATION

The paper has concluded that learner support services are important in enhancing quality of education in universities. Based on the findings of the research, the study recommends the following: universities should strengthen academic guidance and advisory services to guide students on career paths as well as challenges they might be facing in their respective courses of study; there is need for universities to avail more guidance and counselling services to support students and be proactive in identifying and addressing students' needs; the universities should provide and strengthen financial advisory offices to assist students in realizing appropriate avenues of raising finances to support their studies. For example, work-study programmes should be introduced to support the needy students.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The paper focused on the availability and adequacy of learner support services and their influence on quality of education in two public universities. In this regard, further research could be carried out in the following areas: a comparative study could be carried out between private universities and public universities to determine the extent to which available learner support services influence the quality of education between the two categories of universities; and a study that focuses on development of a model entailing elements of learner support services that promotes quality in higher education.

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